

HALLMARKS OF EFFECTIVE SERVICE PROGRAMS

Service and service-learning can be used to teach any subject and meet a wide variety of community needs. However, to provide valuable service, build civic skills, and increase student achievement, project and program designers may wish to consider including some of the following practices, which program experience has shown to be effective:

- Service activities should be of sustained or significant duration. Program experience suggests that a minimum of 40 hours over a school year is necessary to yield positive results for students and the community.
- Teachers or after-school program coordinators or sponsors need to work with students in order to draw the connections between what the students are doing and what they should be learning. Even if service activities are conducted outside of class, it is important that the project have clear and specific learning objectives.
- The service that students perform should have a strong connection to the curriculum they are studying or to their after-school activities.
- The relationship between service and democratic practices, ideas, and history should be made explicit in order that students see service as a civic responsibility.
- Project participants should be given time to reflect on their service. That may involve asking students to keep a journal, or having teachers and organizers lead discussions or coordinate activities that get participants to analyze and think critically about their service. These activities need to be planned, not left to chance.
- Students should have a role not only in executing the service project, but also in making decisions about its development. Students should be involved in leadership roles in all phases of the project.
- In order to ensure that service is really useful and strengthens community ties, strong partnerships with community groups based on mutually agreed upon goals, roles, and responsibilities are essential.

Overall, the most important feature of effective service and service-learning programs is that both learning and service are emphasized. For example, students in quality service-learning programs are graded on what they learn, just as they would be for any other class. But they are also expected to carry out service projects of genuine benefit to the community. Students volunteering outside of a course should also be encouraged to take on meaningful activities and, with the aid of teachers or community group leaders, find ways of reflecting seriously on them or communicating to others what they have learned. For example, a social studies teacher in a community where historical monuments are in disrepair could develop a project in which students work with the local historical society to find ways to repair them. In the process, the students would research local history, create exhibits for the public, further their civic understanding, and even learn preservation techniques.

Similarly, a science teacher in an urban area with little access to fresh produce could teach students about botany, biology, and agricultural practices by having them build and maintain a community garden. The students might even set up a vegetable stand, where they could put the concepts they are learning in their math or economics classes into practice. Or, a Spanish language teacher in an area with a growing Spanish-speaking population could develop a service-learning project to translate brochures and fliers put out by local social service groups or schools. This would not only give students an opportunity to hone their language skills, but also learn more about Hispanic culture.

Each of these projects could be done as part of a course or outside of class. The critical element is that they should combine worthwhile service with well-defined educational objectives if they are to be effective in developing the habits of citizenship and service.

TEN STEPS FOR BRINGING SERVICE TO YOUR CLASSROOM

The following steps will help you create an effective service project or service-learning program. While all these steps are useful to consider, you may not need to perform them all, or follow them in the order presented here. The planning and implementation of service and service-learning programs are dynamic processes, and projects vary greatly. Read through all the steps before undertaking your project, and remember to include participating youth in as many phases as possible.

Step 1: Assess the Needs and Resources of Your Community and School

In selecting a project, consult with community members, civic groups, businesses, government officials, school personnel, and students to determine both the needs of your community and the available resources, including partnership opportunities. Find out who else is doing (or has done) something similar.

Step 2: Form Community Partnerships

Most successful service projects require forming partnerships. You can build on existing relationships and connections, or you can develop new ones with potential partners identified in Step 1. Be realistic about your resources, needs, and limitations, and make sure that your goals are of mutual interest to all of your partners. Also be concrete about the roles and responsibilities of each partner organization.

Step 3: Set Specific Educational Goals and Curriculum

Determine what you expect the young people to learn. Even service and service learning projects organized by community-based organizations or after-school programs should set specific educational goals. Establish what content objectives or standards will be addressed, and incorporate your service and learning objectives into lesson plans. Devise ways to measure and assess whether those goals are being met, including reflection and assessment activities. When evaluating student performance, assess their effort and mastery of the subject. Service outcomes may not be what you expect.

Step 4: Select a Project and Begin Preliminary Planning

Pick a project and determine how all partners can work together to achieve the desired goals. Try to determine your human, financial, physical, and intellectual needs and whether you need additional partners to provide the required resources. Be sure to identify people in your school or organization who can coordinate the project and maintain continuity from year to year.

Step 5: Plan Your Project in Detail

Set up a timeline, create a budget, and assign tasks. Think about how to include your partners in this process. As with any project, thorough planning, including the creation of schedules, benchmarks, budgets, evaluation and assessment tools, and documentation, can identify and correct many potential problems.

Step 6: Acquire Necessary Funding and Resources

If additional funds, goods, or services are needed, consider seeking assistance from local businesses, national corporations, parents, faith-based organizations, government programs (e.g., AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America, your State Education Agency), civic groups, and other community organizations or sources of federal, state, and local funds.

Step 7: Implement and Manage Project

Put your plan into action. Continually assess your project to determine what is working and what could be improved. Involve project partners in evaluating and improving your project.

Step 8: Organize Reflection Activities

Make sure students are thinking about their service experience on a regular basis (e.g., through journals or classroom assignments) and organize activities that allow students to analyze their service and see how their ideas, knowledge and perceptions are changing. Use such reflections to help assess and improve the project. You may want to use the on-line or printable Record of Service found at www.usafreedomcorps.gov.

Step 9: Assess and Evaluate Your Service Program

Ensure that your evaluation assesses the outcomes of the service project for the youth, the community, and the organizations involved. Documentation and evaluation of the project will create a legacy for the individuals and the organizations who participated in and benefited from your service activities. It will also point the way to the next project for your classroom, and may foster activities in other classrooms.

Step 10: Celebrate Achievements

Everyone likes to be recognized for a job well done. Recognition of students can help build habits of service and lead to a lifetime of community involvement. Don't forget to recognize key community partners as well. Recognition may include: displays in school or online, celebratory events such as ribbon cuttings or groundbreakings, visits by local officials, and participation in national recognition programs, some of which are listed in the Tools and Resources section of this guide.

- from Students in Service to America Guidebook

<http://www.studentsinservicetoamerica.org/guidebook/classroom.html#hallmarks>